The Berrien County Historical Association

The Docket

The History Center at Courthouse Square

Vol. 35, No. 9, October 2019

And Now a Word from Our Director

I like to dim the lights and talk about the ghosts I've known and invite other people to tell me their stories. ~Jenna Wortham

My dear friends,

It's rather gloomy here today at Courthouse Square - rainy and cold with cloudy cover that gets me into the Halloween mood. Sipping hot cocoa from my ghost mug helps, too!

Ghosts are on my mind this week as I find myself digging through the BCHA history files prepping for the new exhibits we will be installing in the 1839 Courthouse. Voices of the Historical Commission whisper their joys and excitement over funds raised, show concern over structural issues, and speak with such passion in order to protect this simple building of wood and brick that represents so much history.

To work in a museum is to essentially be a medium - you're always hearing the dead speak!

Earlier this week, a very specific ghost appeared in my inbox. The Historical Society of Michigan is naming a new community room in their building after John Gillette - a big name in their history and ours. As I dug deeper in the files, John's voice got louder and louder. While the whole Commission worked together, it cannot be ignored that John was the Courthouse's biggest champion.

Instead of being scared of these ghostly voices in my ear, I am energized by it. I have no doubt that John would have loved my energy and enthusiasm for this place and these people because they match his own. We could have swapped "horror" stories of restoration projects - the time I had to hold close a pipe to stop a bathroom from flooding while he would have joked about being historically authentic in using a sickle to cut grass on the grounds. And I bet he would have loved the project chart I keep in my office, designed grow the BCHA and its impact on Berrien County.

When we speak of being haunted, its almost framed as a negative thing. But the ghostly voices from the past - be it John's or someone else's - whisper in my ear of spectacular things done before that can be done again. John and the rest of the commission thought long term but it's unlikely they could have ever imagined how far reaching their one idea would be fifty years later.

I hope that like John, my voice joins the ghostly choir championing the BCHA and its mission long after I leave this place and this plane.

Happy Halloween!

Rhiannon

Today's Actions are Tomorrow's Legacies

After receiving a generous donation in his name, the Historical Society of Michigan is honoring past HSM Board President and past BCHA Board President John Gillette by naming their new community room after him.

A Letter to the Editor announcing this honor is set to be published in The Journal Era *in the coming weeks and we've been given permission to announce it to our membership via The Docket.*

Below is part of an article about John from The Journal Era*, August of 1983, shortly after his untimely death from a heart attack. Nothing was edited except for length.*

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 24, 1969

COURTHOUSE RENOVATION: John Gillette, a director of Berrien County Historical commission, views renovation under way in 130-year-old former Berrien County courthouse at Berrien Springs. Commission now is restoring building for use as a museum. In wall behind judge's table workmen found layers of plaster, insulating board, sawed lath strips, decorative molding and bats, vertical boards to cover cracks and keep out wind. (Albert Dittes photo)

The restoration of the 1839 Courthouse in Berrien Springs was one of John Gillette's favorite projects. Berrien County Probate Judge Don Dick brought the special task to John's attention.

"We did a lot of the ground work together. He took most of the initiative in doing most of the research. I remember both of us going in very hot weather (July) and using a hand sickle to cut down high weeds and raking trash in the backyard, both of us sweating like troopers, " Judge Dick said.

"John, his wife Pat, and son Stuart were at the courthouse constantly, including weekends, holidays, and evenings. He was the most helpful person you could imagine," Judge Dick added.

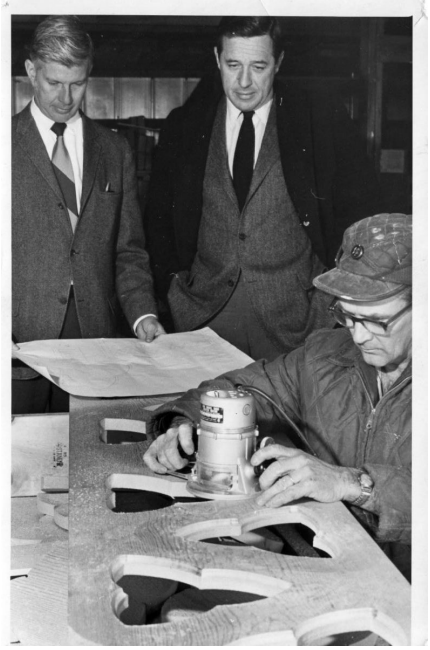
Judge Dick brought John into the Berrien County Historical Association and later John became the second president of the association. "John put all of his efforts into the courthouse project, he thought it was a very worthwhile challenge. He did the detective work, research and hard labor. He was on of the finest historians in Southwestern Michigan," Judge Dick said.

Additional notes and stories were shared in the same issue's Letters to the Editor and they echoed these sentiments. John's efforts ensured that the Berrien County Historical Association saved not just the Courthouse, but set the path that would save the Sheriff's House, the Old Records Building, the Murdock Cabin, and the building that would become Bennett's Forge. John wrote a poem on how he wanted to be remembered and we share that here:

Don't send me flowers that I can't smell
They'll do nothing to make me well
Just spend your money to raise a toast
To old Gillette's apprentice ghost.

These photos come from the BHCA archives and collections

Top: A news article in *The News Palladium* in September 1969 updates the public on the changes to the 1839 Courthouse and the plans for reopening the building the following year to the public as a museum. The article was written by Andrews University student Albert Dittes, who also took the photo of John. This view shows him in the upper gallery, which was extended to both sides of the building while it was a Seventh Day Adventist church. These extensions were removed during the renovation itself.



Left: This picture appeared in *The Niles Star* with the following caption: Carl Peever, a carpenter at Home Lumber Co., Niles, makes a replica of an old railing for the outside of the original Berrien County courthouse at Berrien Springs, which is being restored. Watching are Richard Miller (left), owner of Home Lumber, and John Gillette, vice president of the First National Bank of Southwestern Michigan. Gillette provided Peever with drawings for the railing pieces which will replace a portion of the railing that disappeared over the years.

Note that the piece Mr. Peever is working on is now located around the second floor balcony on the front of the Courthouse.

From the Collection: Pardon Our Dust

The staff here at the BCHA is setting the final plans for our renovation project in November. We are repainting portions of the Courthouse interior, redoing the gift shop, updating our Courthouses exhibit, installing a brand new exhibit about the 1839 Courthouse, installing our temporary holiday exhibit over in the Sheriff's House, AND decorating the grounds for Christmas. Whew!

To celebrate these new changes, we found some amazing pictures from the original restoration of the 1839 Courthouse.

The building didn't do well after it was left to its own devices, making more work for the Historical Commission as they moved towards the physical part of the restoration process. The auditorium seating was used by the church for their services. This photo was taken from the upper gallery facing the south side of the building.

When the building was under the ownership of the Seventh day Adventist Church, the second floor balcony was removed to make way for stairs leading up to the doors. These stairs were removed to return the entrance to the bottom floor.

Not all the renovations occurred upstairs! This picture from the lower level shows what it was like before our exhibit cases were installed. This is facing the entrance into the exhibit room - you can see the stairs leading to the foyer and doorway outside.

With all the walls pulled down, the Historical Commission had a blank slate to restore the building back to its original courtroom look. This is also facing south from the upper gallery space.

Your Opinion Matters!

The BCHA is renovating our gift shop in November and we want to give the new look a new name! Help decide what the name will be by voting in our poll! Last day to vote is November 11, 2019!

CLICK HERE FOR THE POLL

Meet the New Staff

Over the last few months, you've had a chance to meet our director through our events and*The Docket*. But Rhiannon isn't the only new staff on board with the BCHA. This month we're letting you get to know our two new staff members!

Sandra Spiering was hired in October of 2019 to serve as our new curator, filling a three year vacant seat. She is originally from Battle Creek, but moved away after graduating from Michigan State University in 1993. She married into the Air Force and lived in six states and two countries, receiving an amazing history education along the way. Sandra has been living in Berrien Country for four years now and enjoys learning about the diverse narratives in this area.

From the beaches of Normandy, to the trenches in Verdun and the forests of Bastogne, these first-hand experiences spurred her to return to college and obtain her Master's degree.

She has two children whom she home schooled throughout her many adventures and hopes one day

Tara Velez original joined the BCHA as a Board Member earlier this year. She stepped down temporarily to work the front desk after Kelsey left for her new position. Her enthusiasm for the mission of the BCHA and a desire to be apart of the coming change led to an offer to serve as our new Museum Operations Coordinator. She happily accepted.

Originally from Saginaw, Tara - like Rhiannon and Sandra - left home for the wider world. She has also called Texas and Maryland home, although she has returned to her Michigan roots and now calls Niles home.

She's always loved history and briefly studied historic preservation and architecture before switching gears and earning two Bachelors degrees in History and Religious Studies, two areas she still carries much love for and is excited to dive into while at the BCHA.

In addition to working with the BCHA, she works for the YMCA of Southwestern Michigan, where she indulges in her love of dance and movement as an instructor. You can find her leading classes on yoga, barre, WERQ - among others.

Tara is a mom of two daughters and one son, who is a recent high school graduate and is studying to be a minster.

they will love history as much as she does. Her daughter is now a freshman at Arizona State University and her son is a junior at Michigan Lutheran High School.

She is looking forward to sharing her love of history with the local community by providing a variety of engaging programs and exhibits to The History Center and revealing the rich collection of artifacts and materials that BCHA houses.

Wanted: Volunteers

Roll up your sleeves, we need volunteers to help us with our gift shop renovation! Painters are especially needed the week of November 18th through the 22nd! Those who want to help us sort through gift shop items can help during that same time. Those who can heavy lift (especially if they have their own equipment) can help us November 11th through November 15th.

Eager to join us? Call 269-471-1202 or email tvelez@berrienhistory.org to be scheduled.

Calendar: BCHA Events in November & December

CLOSED! November 13 through December 4
The grounds will be closed for renovations inside the 1839 Courthouse and the Sheriff's Office. We will reopen just in time for Kindle Your Christmas Spirit on December 5th!

December 5 through January 2020, Dear Santa Holiday Exhibit
Throughout the month of December, visitors will be able to step back in time as they explore our newest exhibit, Dear Santa! Photos and artifacts from the BCHA collections will be on display inside the Sheriff's House to celebrate the frenzy of Christmas morning. This exhibit is free and guests will be invited to share their own holiday wishes! *Free admission*

December 5th, Kindle Your Christmas Spirit 2019; 6:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m.
Guests attending Kindle Your Christmas have many activities and events to choose from! Blacksmithing demonstrations will be held in Bennett's Forge, carolers will share their gift of song in the Courthouse, the Dear Santa exhibit will be open in the Sheriff's House, and pioneer living will be on full display in the Murdock Cabin. Throughout the property, craft and hands-on activities will let guests create their own piece of holiday magic. A 12 days of Christmas scavenger hunt will also let guests vie for a BCHA themed prize! The gift shop even gets in on the act with a 5-10-15 sale! Free admission and great for the whole family! *Free admission*

December 15th, Sweet Traditions: Holiday Dessert Traditions from Around the World, 2:30 p.m.
No matter where you go in the world, we celebrate with food, creating inter-generational traditions that last for decades. Learn about some of the traditions inspired by secular and religious holidays during the winter months! Light refreshments will be available and guests are encouraged to bring their own stories (and goodies!) to share! *Free Admission*

Become a Member | **Visit Our Website** | **Make a Donation**

Board of Directors
Liz Muhlenbeck, President
Tom Nelson, Vice President
Mary Ellen Drolet, Treasurer
Stephen Smith, Secretary

James (Jim) Curran, Berrien County Liaison
Heidi Duncan
Joseph Fletcher
Dennis Hollingsead
Mariann Litznerski

Staff
Rhiannon Cizon, Executive Director
Sandra Spiering, Curator
Tara Velez, Museum Operations Coordinator

BCHA Mission Statement
The Mission of the BCHA is to collect, preserve and interpret the history of Berrien County through exhibits, tours, publications, and educational and community outreach programs for public benefit.

Eleanor Marquis
Carrie Smietanka-Haney
Ryan Wojtowicz